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ABSTRACT

The fact sheet considers the importance of recreation and leisure time activities for people with mental retardation. A case is made for mainstreamed services, and suggestions are offered for families seeking to procure successful mainstreamed experiences in community recreational programs. Among suggestions are adapting family games to the person's skill level, using other people in helping roles to insure the success of mainstreamed activities, helping educate the community by expecting appropriate behavior and not making exceptions, and encouraging cooperative rather than competitive play at home and in the neighborhood. The paper concludes with listings of activity ideas appropriate to different ages, including single person activities, social activities, arts and crafts, active games and sports, table games, expeditions, and hobby possibilities. (CL)

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Someday I may want to know about...

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Leisure and Recreational Activities for Children and Adults with Mental Retardation

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A MCARC INFORMATION SHEET

MCARC Family and Community Resources

984-5792

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One in a series on subjects of interest to parents and others concerned with the well-being of children and adults with mental retardation.

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The Importance of Recreation

Recreational and leisure time activities are essential to the maximum growth and development as well as the happiness and contentment of all children and adults; to lead full and meaningful lives, people of all ages, including people with mental retardation, need the rich opportunities for activity, productivity, and social interaction that are offered through recreation. Recreation can play a major role in the physical, social, and emotional development of child and adult. Recreation can lead to improved physical fitness, the development of new skills and independence, the gaining of self-confidence, the enjoyment of doing things by oneself and with others. No matter what the age or skill level of your son or daughter, recognize that in seeking out or designing his or her leisure programs, attention should be paid to some important guidelines:

. . . Leisure programming for a person of any age should be normalizing and individualized;

. . . Leisure programming should be based on an individual's interests, both current and potential;

. . . Leisure programming should include active as well as passive activities;

. . . Leisure programming should promote social interaction whenever possible.

A Rationale for Mainstreamed Services

It is our belief that all individuals share the right to participate in community life and to use community resources along with other people. Federal law supports that belief. For too long, communities have encouraged separate, segregated-only programs for people who happen to be mentally retarded. Our county, as well as others across this nation, is looking with enthusiasm at the advantages offered by nonsegregated community programs, appropriate to the chronological age of the participant, which encourage interaction with nonhandicapped peers. Advocates for integration are proving that with creative, appropriate strategies and sensitivity and awareness on the part of recreational agencies, group leaders, teachers, and families, mainstreaming can work. For parents of children and adults with mental retardation, it may take a special courage to open hitherto closed doors; it is always easier to accept "what is" than to remake a system. Parents of children and adults with handicapping conditions have taken chances in the past and their courage and strength have caused systems to change and minds to open. By challenging past assumptions and attitudes, we can expand everyone's world. Parents and advocates must be somewhat daring, rather stubborn, and often amazingly creative. Parents and advocates need to search for new ways to make things happen rather than continue to accept the excuses and barriers of past history. Growth and adaptation, for people and societies, are lifelong processes.

What is being requested today by some and will be expected tomorrow by many is for all children to be part of the non-special world. Historically, there were many reasons for special recreational programs: the recognition that "regular" programs would not accept our children easily; the thought that special training for instructors and leaders would be necessary and

costly and therefore not available; the worry that extra time would be needed to assimilate our children into the mainstream; the concern about the fears of staff and other participants and their parents; safety and liability issues; the need for adaptive equipment and resources that only special programs were thought able to provide. Parents themselves had legitimate concerns: Is participation really possible? Will my child be able to "keep up" enough to benefit from the program? Will my child be embarrassed or harmed or frightened?

Some of today's parents have new thoughts and expectations. Some are realizing that full participation in an activity may not be necessary for the true enjoyment of our children, young and old; partial participation, since it offers the overwhelming advantage of being with the rest of the world, may be satisfying enough. These parents want their children who happen to be retarded, no matter what their level, to experience the freedom to learn and participate, to live as fully as possible in their society, to have variety in the number of activities available to them, to be with nonhandicapped peer models. They believe that their children will develop more positive self-images in environments that do not deal exclusively with disabilities but rather allow them the dignity of risk-taking and discovery. Mainstreaming offers a healthy challenge to everyone to provide the opportunity for social growth for all people. It is a path to a future without prejudice and judgment. Equal opportunity can have the result of improving everyone's quality of life. It will create new expectations in the community. It will eventually lead to a world that works for everyone.

Strategies to Make It Happen

Until recreational systems promote mainstreaming, families must take the initiative in mainstreaming their own family member. How can you as a parent help to insure a successful mainstreaming experience in a community recreational program for your son or daughter? How can a group home counselor aid in the integration process of children and adults? Following are some thoughts to keep in mind and some general and specific strategies to make positive things happen.

° Think through what your son's or daughter's brothers and sisters are doing or were doing at a similar age. Think ahead to your handicapped child's future--where do you want him to live? How will he spend his leisure time? Check local newspapers, recreation guides and bulletins, local and national park activities, community theaters; call community centers, YMCAs, YWCAs, libraries, churches, and schools for leisure time ideas.

° Think of your son's or daughter's skill level and then adapt family games to that ability. Either the materials or the rules can be changed; by simplifying games such as checkers, monopoly, or Uno, people of any age or ability level can learn valuable recreation-leisure skills to share with others. Siblings can be valuable strategists and adapters.

° Parents who are aware and sensitive can act as advocates in emphasizing their child's right to participate in community activities. It hardly needs saying that gentle assertion is preferable to aggressive demanding. A positive experience for a recreation director or a group leader is the best of all attitude-changers.

° Decide before enrollment in a class or activity what adaptation or aids might be appropriate to make the experience successful; then help to put

them in place. This may involve a pre-visit simply to observe. A phone call or note to the director may be as helpful as setting up a more formal meeting before actual enrollment.

° Mainstreaming, to work successfully, will require other people. "Buddies," peer volunteers, paid staff members, baby sitters and companions, advocates, parents, and siblings can all serve important roles. Enlist young people from the neighborhood in the process, members of service clubs, students in child development courses, pupils in schools where mainstreaming occurs, Girl and Boy Scouts. Call the special education departments of local colleges. Talk to the Montgomery County Department of Recreation, Therapeutics Section, at 468-4560, for other possibilities.

° As a parent, you can serve as a teacher to the community in raising the expectations of others toward your child and other children by expecting appropriate behavior of your child and those who interact with him. Special exceptions should not be made. If other children in a play group wait for a specific time to get a snack, you must insist that your child need not be fed early. If your child has pulled someone's hair, he deserves a reprimand, not an excuse on the basis of his handicap. If your child has the ability to dress himself, he should be expected to do so after a swim program, even if it takes him extra time. If you, as parent, are not comfortable in advocating this position, let a brother or sister, a sitter or companion, a peer volunteer or a paid advocate do it for you.

° Try to think always in terms of "natural proportion." In other words, people with mental retardation should be integrated into activities and programs in the same proportion that their handicapping condition and level of functioning appear in the wider community. Where attempting to integrate a group of twenty teenagers who are mentally retarded into a local community recreation center teen club is doubtless doomed to failure, sending two teenagers with severe mental handicaps along with their teenage "buddies" to that same recreation center, with planned strategies for interaction, can lead to a success story.

° Use all the environments that all people use. If your child enjoys records and tapes, don't just have him listen to those records and tapes; take him to stores to buy them. Introduce variety into his life in every way possible. Encourage interaction with others at every opportunity.

° Think of meaningful experiences for your child. Know your child's interests and build on them. Write down what he enjoys and does with confidence, what he rejects, what he has difficulty with. The goal should be individual participation in ordinary community activities with all the necessary support.

° Encourage cooperative rather than competitive play at home and in the neighborhood. Taking turns or helping one another can be fun, too!

° Perhaps your child is reasonably capable of group participation and needs only some skill-building to make an experience successful. In this case, segregated activities may be less threatening to him as settings in which to practice those skills. It may also be possible to use the summer months to advantage. One mother we know designed a "summer socialization program" for her son. By talking with a guidance counselor at a nearby high school, she enlisted several young students capable of combining physical ability, pleasant dispositions, and an interest in others in helping her son

to perfect his basketball and swimming techniques and gain some proficiency in model-building. Two of his paid summer companions continued in the role of friend when the school year again began.

° Participate yourself as a volunteer helper in a program or class; become a Camp Fire Girls leader or a soccer coach. Anything that will lead to positive change will take some commitment, time, and energy. If you cannot afford the time or energy yourself, look for others to help you.

° Pay a university student or a neighbor to accompany your son or daughter by enrolling both of them in a class of mutual interest.

° Parents can make things happen--not only for their own sons or daughters but for everyone's sons and daughters. Serve on citizen advisory boards for recreation programs in your area. (Call the Recreation Department to learn how to volunteer.) Write letters to recreation providers and to local newspapers. Advocate. Challenge. Ask MCARC to help.

° And keep in mind that even with the best of intentions on all sides, not every door will open. Resistance does not simply fade away. Be prepared to try and try again. Being a pioneer may not be easy but it is stimulating. You have at any moment the option of staying where you are or moving on. If you choose the new direction, you and your child will have a direct influence on the next generation. Tomorrow's teachers, doctors, nurses, employers, recreation directors and parents will profit from playing today with your son or daughter, learning that differences do not mean that experiences cannot be shared.

° In thinking through modifications and adaptations and strategies, try brainstorming and problem-solving with people who have already been successful. Call MCARC's Family and Community Resources, 984-5792, for suggestions. What may seem almost impossible at first thought may involve little more than changing an attitude--your own or someone else's. Planning, strategizing, and organizing can change a "WHAT????" into a "Why not?" Think about it.

Possible Leisure and Recreation Activities

As you think through possibilities for recreation and leisure time activities for your child, do not be limited by where your son or daughter has been placed in school. Leisure interests need not be based on academic accomplishment. With some ingenuity, many activities can be adapted so that people with even the most severe mental handicaps can participate. Learning to use a radio with headphones, for example, can be an important accomplishment; a person will be able to use this skill frequently and in a variety of settings. It is a skill used by people of all ages in our society; therefore, it is both normalizing and age-appropriate.

Listed below are some ideas for activities appropriate to different ages that can be adapted to different abilities. With the help of siblings, neighborhood children, teachers, group home counselors, sitters, and companions, you should be able to think of possible adaptations for your son and daughter as well as expansions of the list.

Single person activities: listening to a variety of tapes, radio programs and records; using a viewmaster; looking at slides; playing the autoharp, guitar, piano, recorder, percussion instruments; writing to pen pals; doing

work books; drawing with felt pens, crayons or chalk; painting with brush or sponge.

Social activities: bingo, dances, dance classes, parties, picnics, group singing, chorus participation, church groups; card games (slapjack, rummy, old maid, go fish, concentration, hearts); television video games.

Arts and crafts: basketry, beadwork, block printing. cake decorating, candle making, soap carving, ceramics, coloring, dyeing, etching, finger painting, jewelry making, knitting, stitchery, macrame, latch hooking, needlepointing, weaving, embroidery, leatherwork, woodwork, clay, pottery, puppets.

Active games and sports: rolling down hills, blowing soap bubbles, throwing, catching and rolling balls, bag punching, baseball pitching, basket shooting, baton twirling, bicycling, bowling, calisthenics, sledding, croquet, soccer, exercising, fishing, gymnastics, handball, tennis, hiking, horseback riding, jacks, kickball, jogging, marbles, miniature golf, model airplane flying, ice skating, roller skating, rope jumping, sailing, shuffle board, skiing, slimnastics, ping pong, trampoline, weight lifting, wheelchair sports.

Table games: checkers, chinese checkers, parcheesi, Sorry, dominoes, Uno, Perfection, Othello, Lego blocks, Lite-brite, battery-operated games like Simon and Speak and Spell.

Family and friend expeditions: shopping, strolling, neighborhood exploring, visits to arboretums, aquariums, libraries, museums, fairs, festivals, community theater productions, pet shows, flower shows, the zoo, video arcades.

Hobby possibilities: scrapbooks, photo albums, collecting postcards, sea shells or stamps, gardening, bird watching.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS CONCERNING RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

ACCESS WASHINGTON: A GUIDE TO METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON FOR THE PHYSICALLY DISABLED. Compiled and published by Information Center for Handicapped Individuals, Inc., 1619 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. 1984 edition. Write for current price.

This listing of facilities in the metropolitan Washington area includes recreation centers, sites of interest, theaters and stages, restaurants, museums and galleries, auditoriums and stadiums, and more. Included under each list are descriptions of parking, entrance accessibility, interior access, restroom entrances and telephone access.

GOING PLACES WITH CHILDREN IN WASHINGTON.
Available at local bookstores or from Green Acres School, 11701 Danville Drive, Rockville, Maryland 20852. 10th edition, 1982.

This comprehensive paperback contains helpful information on places to visit in and around the Washington area. A wealth of information for family recreation.

LET'S-PLAY-TO-GROW.
Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., Foundation, 1701 K Street, N.W., Suite 205, Washington, D.C. 20006. Write for current price.

"Let's Play to Grow" is a program designed "to bring the physical and spiritual delights of play to all the parents and teachers who so deeply wish to reach special children and share with them a close and creative relationship." Basic step-by-step instruction is provided for such activities as walking, running, jumping, dance, ball skills, bowling, volleyball, basketball, soccer, kickball and softball. A guide for the special child who is very young or severely handicapped and a manual for parents and teachers are also included.

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The Exceptional Parent. April, 1983. Volume 13, No. 2. "Recreation and Leisure: Expanding Horizons" issue.

Mental Retardation. June, 1981. Volume 19, No. 3. "Community Integration of Mentally Retarded Adults Through Leisure Activity," by Charles L. Salzberg and Cynthia A. Langford. Pp. 127-131.

Teaching Exceptional Children. Summer, 1980. "Mainstreaming Moderately Retarded Children in the Elementary Physical Education Program" by Robert A. Rider. Pp. 150-152.

Therapeutic Recreation Journal, Fourth Quarter, 1979. Volume XIII, No. 4. (Entire issue is devoted to mainstreaming)